



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF  
THE CHAIRMAN

March 9, 2020

The Honorable Joe Manchin  
United States Senate  
306 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Manchin:

Thank you for your letter regarding the Commission's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. Closing the digital divide is my top priority. I have seen for myself what affordable high-speed Internet access can do for a community—for its families, its schools, its hospitals, its farms, its businesses—as well as the impact of its absence. And that's why I must respectfully decline your request that the Commission slow down its efforts to bring high-speed broadband to rural Americans who we know currently lack access to digital opportunity.

At the FCC's January meeting, we established final rules for the \$20.4 billion Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. As you note, this represents the Commission's biggest step yet to close the digital divide and will connect some of the hardest-to-serve areas of our country by providing support through a two-phase competitive auction for up to gigabit service to millions of unserved Americans who currently lack access to fixed 25/3 Mbps broadband.

Current data conclusively show that millions of Americans—as many as 230,000 in West Virginia alone—lack access to 25/3 Mbps broadband. Many can't even get a 10/1 Mbps connection, and right now there simply is no business case for the private sector alone to deploy broadband in those areas. This means that millions of Americans can't start a business, advance their children's and their own education, use precision agriculture technologies, access telemedicine, or benefit from the digital economy. And *every* map shows them as languishing on the wrong side of the digital divide.

We owe it to these hard-working families to deploy broadband as quickly as possible. Delaying action would only further disadvantage those in rural America who we know do not have access to digital opportunity.

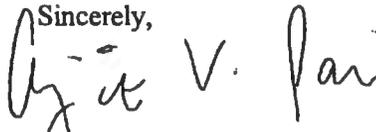
You point out that there are some Americans who lack access to 25/3 Mbps broadband but won't be eligible for Phase I of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund auction because they live in areas reported as generally served. As you know, I am well aware of the shortcomings of current broadband maps; Commission staff are hard at work implementing the precise, granular broadband maps under the Commission's Digital Opportunity Data Collection adopted last August. The Digital Opportunity Data Collection will incorporate feedback from state, local, and Tribal governments, and from consumers on the ground. That's why the Commission has allocated at least \$4.4 billion (plus any funds remaining as a result of competitive bidding in

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Phase I) for the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase II auction, which will use the new broadband maps to target those areas located in partially served census blocks.

But there is simply no excuse for the Commission to wait to deploy broadband to rural Americans we know for a fact are unserved. It would be like refusing to provide medical treatment to people that we know are sick until we identify every single person in the country suffering from that same illness.

I appreciate your interest in this matter. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,  
  
Ajit V. Pai